

VICTIM

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1. Core Definition

The concept of the **victim** fundamentally refers to an individual, group, or entity that suffers harm, loss, or injury as a direct result of circumstances, actions, or events. Academically, this term carries a dual meaning, encompassing both those subjected to intentional malicious acts and those affected by unintentional misfortune. In the context of criminal justice and psychology, a victim is typically defined as a person who is the object of another individual's aggressive, discriminatory, persistently hostile, or assaultive actions--a definition central to the field of criminology. This definition establishes a clear relationship between an aggressor (offender) and the recipient of the aggression (victim), usually involving a recognized breach of legal or social norms.

Conversely, the definition of a victim extends beyond deliberate human action to include those who have encountered a natural disaster, mishap, accident, or systemic failure. For instance, individuals suffering losses from a hurricane, industrial accident, or widespread famine are often designated as victims, emphasizing the involuntary and damaging nature of the experience regardless of whether a human perpetrator exists. The critical element across both definitions is the experience of involuntary suffering, deprivation, or injury, which places the individual in a position of need or redress relative to the damage sustained.

Within legal frameworks, the definition is often highly specific, determining eligibility for support, compensation, or participation in judicial proceedings. The modern evolution of the term attempts to move beyond passive connotation, recognizing the individual's experience and granting them agency within the justice system, differentiating them from mere witnesses or affected parties. This emphasis on recognizing and validating the harm experienced is crucial for therapeutic recovery and legal accountability.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The word **victim** originates from the Latin term *victima*, which historically referred specifically to a living creature designated for ritual sacrifice, particularly in religious ceremonies. This ancient root underscores a historical connection to religious and communal acts of atonement, where the victim was not defined by suffering but by its designated role in a sacred context. Over centuries, the meaning gradually shifted, losing its specific sacrificial connotation and evolving toward a generalized reference to suffering and misfortune.

It was not until the 17th and 18th centuries that the term began to take on its modern psychological and legal meaning, referring to a person injured or killed by another. During this period, criminal

law primarily focused on the transgression against the state or sovereign, viewing crimes as injuries against public order rather than against the individual victim. The victim, therefore, played a secondary role, often relegated to being a mere source of evidence or a claimant in a civil suit, with little recognition of their personal injury or need for restorative justice.

The true academic and socio-legal recognition of the victim's central role began in the mid-20th century. The post-World War II era, coupled with rising awareness of human rights abuses and the formalization of specialized fields like criminology, provided the necessary context for the victim to transition from an incidental party to a focus of study and concern. This shift laid the groundwork for the establishment of victim assistance programs and specialized legislation, fundamentally changing the operational landscape of justice systems worldwide.

3. The Rise of Victimology

The systematic study of victims, known as Victimology, emerged as a distinct subdiscipline within criminology during the 1940s and 1950s. Pioneers such as Hans von Hentig and Benjamin Mendelsohn are credited with establishing the foundational concepts that shifted focus away from the sole preoccupation with the offender. Victimology seeks to understand the causes, nature, and consequences of victimization, the dynamics between victims and offenders, the societal reactions to victimization, and the efficacy of prevention and restorative measures.

Early victimological research, while groundbreaking, was often controversial. Von Hentig's work categorized victims based on susceptibility, suggesting certain demographic or psychological traits might predispose individuals to victimization. Mendelsohn introduced the concept of "victim culpability," classifying victims based on their level of involvement or provocation in the criminal act--ranging from the completely innocent victim to the victim who is more guilty than the offender. Although these early models are criticized today for potentially leading to victim blaming, they were instrumental in forcing the justice system to acknowledge that victimization is not a random event but often involves complex sociological and interactional dynamics.

Contemporary victimology has broadened significantly, moving beyond the narrow focus on victim precipitation toward a more comprehensive understanding of the structural, social, and psychological factors that contribute to vulnerability. Modern studies emphasize victim assistance, restorative justice, and addressing systemic failures that create environments conducive to victimization, such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of institutional support. The discipline is now strongly oriented toward advocacy, policy reform, and trauma-informed care.

4. Typologies and Classification of Victims

Efforts to classify victims serve both theoretical and practical purposes, aiding researchers in identifying risk factors and informing legal and social service responses. Hans von Hentig, in his

seminal 1948 work, proposed various sociological and psychological classifications, identifying groups inherently more vulnerable due to social position, age, or mental state. These included the **young**, the **elderly**, the **mentally defective**, the **immigrant**, the **depressed**, and the **wanton** (reckless), arguing that these characteristics either inhibited self-protection or made them more attractive targets for predatory behavior.

Benjamin Mendelsohn's typology focused strictly on the role and responsibility of the victim in the crime, creating a spectrum of culpability that remains a point of academic debate. His categories include the **Innocent Victim** (no fault), the **Victim with Minor Guilt** (e.g., placing oneself in a risky situation), the **Victim as Guilty as the Offender** (e.g., engaging in mutual combat), and the **Imaginary Victim** (believing oneself harmed when they were not). While these classifications provide a framework for discussing interactional dynamics, they are handled cautiously in modern criminology to avoid unjustly assigning blame.

Further classifications have emerged based on the nature of the crime and the relationship to the offender. These include primary victims (directly affected), secondary victims (family, friends, or first responders affected by the trauma of the primary victim), and tertiary victims (the community or society affected by a pervasive or high-profile crime). Understanding these different levels of impact is critical for designing effective mental health and support services that address the broad ripple effects of violence and disaster across communities.

5. Legal and Judicial Status (Victim Rights)

In most Western legal systems, the establishment of formal **victim rights** is a relatively modern development, evolving dramatically since the latter half of the 20th century. Historically, the state took priority in prosecuting the crime, often marginalizing the individual victim. The Victim Rights Movement advocated for systemic changes to ensure victims were treated with dignity and respect, and that their interests were represented throughout the criminal justice process. This advocacy led to the enactment of specific legislation, including constitutional amendments in some jurisdictions, formalizing victim protections.

Key rights now enshrined in law typically include the right to be informed about the progress of the case (e.g., arrests, court dates, parole hearings), the right to be present at all relevant public proceedings, and the right to consult with the prosecution. One of the most significant advancements is the right to present a Victim Impact Statement (VIS). The VIS allows the victim to detail the physical, financial, and psychological consequences of the crime to the court before sentencing, ensuring that the human cost of the offense is considered alongside legal precedents and mitigating factors related to the offender.

Furthermore, many jurisdictions have established mechanisms for victim compensation and restitution. Compensation programs, often funded through fines or state funds, aim to cover

medical bills, lost wages, and counseling expenses when restitution from the offender is impossible or inadequate. The expansion of these legal rights signifies a fundamental shift in the punitive focus of the justice system, acknowledging the state's responsibility not only to punish crime but also to support and protect those harmed by it.

6. Psychological Impact and Trauma

The experience of victimization, particularly from interpersonal violence or trauma, invariably precipitates significant **psychological distress**. The immediate effects can include acute stress reactions, shock, numbness, and heightened anxiety. In the long term, victims frequently experience psychological conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), characterized by intrusive memories, avoidance behaviors, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and hyperarousal. Depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse often co-occur following severe victimization.

A crucial psychological dimension is the loss of control and the resulting shatter of fundamental assumptions about the world, often referred to as "assumptive world theory." Victims frequently lose their sense of safety, predictability, and personal invulnerability, leading to chronic feelings of helplessness and distrust. This disruption requires extensive therapeutic intervention aimed at rebuilding cognitive frameworks and restoring a sense of agency and safety, frequently utilizing modalities such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).

A related phenomenon is **secondary victimization**, also known as post-crime victimization. This occurs when the victim suffers further trauma, not directly from the initial perpetrator, but from the insensitive or inadequate response of institutions or society. This can manifest through skepticism from law enforcement, invasive questioning during legal proceedings, bureaucratic hurdles in accessing services, or public stigma. Secondary victimization can often be as damaging as the original event, reinforcing feelings of isolation and injustice and complicating the healing process. Therefore, trauma-informed practices across all professional sectors--legal, medical, and social work--are essential to mitigating this harm.

7. Societal and Cultural Perceptions (Victim Blaming)

Societal perceptions of victims are highly complex and often contradictory, oscillating between expressions of profound sympathy and insidious tendencies toward **victim blaming**. Victim blaming occurs when the responsibility for the harm suffered is shifted, entirely or partially, from the perpetrator to the victim. Phrases like "she shouldn't have been there" or "he should have fought back" are common examples of this mechanism, particularly in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Psychologically, victim blaming is often explained by the Just-World Hypothesis, a cognitive bias whereby individuals need to believe that the world is inherently fair and that people generally get what they deserve. If something terrible happens to an innocent person, this belief system is challenged, causing severe psychological discomfort. To restore the perception of a just world, observers rationalize the event by attributing fault to the victim, thereby creating a psychological distance and reassuring themselves that such misfortune will not befall them if they behave "correctly."

The cultural impact of victim blaming is severe, contributing to the underreporting of crimes, especially those involving marginalized populations who fear institutional bias or public scrutiny. Conversely, a counter-movement has strongly promoted victim advocacy, emphasizing solidarity, empowerment, and the absolute focus on the perpetrator's accountability. This advocacy aims to validate the victim's experience without demanding impossible standards of perfection or vigilance, fostering an environment where seeking help is safe and supported.

8. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of the victim is continually debated, particularly concerning the politics and ethics of **victimhood** as a social identity. Critics argue that an overemphasis on victim status can potentially reduce individuals to their trauma, overshadowing their resilience, agency, and other dimensions of identity. Sociological discussions sometimes explore the idea of "competitive victimhood," where different groups claim greater suffering or disadvantage to gain political leverage or resources, potentially polarizing social discourse.

A significant challenge lies in defining the boundaries of victimization, especially concerning systemic or abstract harms. While traditional definitions focus on direct interaction (offender-victim), modern sociological discourse recognizes victims of historical injustice, institutional discrimination, environmental degradation, or corporate misconduct. Determining legal standing and appropriate redress for these diffuse forms of harm requires complex legislative and philosophical consideration, often pitting individual experience against collective responsibility.

Ultimately, the goal of modern academic and legal discourse is to balance the recognition of genuine harm and the need for support, compensation, and justice, while simultaneously affirming the strength and agency of the individual. The critical perspective insists on ensuring that the label of victim is not used to perpetuate a sense of helplessness, but rather to serve as a necessary legal and psychological starting point for recovery and empowerment.

9. Further Reading

[Victimology](#) (Wikipedia)

[Victim Impact Statement](#) (Wikipedia)

Restorative Justice (National Institute of Justice)

Just-World Hypothesis (Wikipedia)

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